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The Fight to Freedom: Arawaks and the Maroons

Oppression has been omnipresent in Jamaican civilization as early as the sixteenth century. The indigenous Arawaks peacefully inhabited the island for centuries until the Spanish established control in the 1500s. This invasion was the catalyst for many years of injustice to come. The once self-sufficient Arawaks became slaves under Spanish authority. The English soon caught word of the Jamaican Island and its valuable resources and took over the land in the seventeenth century. The Maroons were created by a group of runaway Spanish slaves. Disagreements between the Maroons and the English colonists lasted for years until the Emancipation Act of 1833. From the extinction of the Arawaks to the deportation of the Maroons, Europe plagued the once placid land of Jamaica and made it into a country tainted by brutality and crime.

The Arawaks, who were also known as "the Tainos," arrived in Jamaica from South America around 600-950 A.D. They named the Island, "Xaymaca, the land of wood and water." This name has stuck with the island ever since even though people such as Christopher Columbus tried to change it. They were also responsible for the creation of the hammock. This proved to be important because it allowed better health conditions on boats. It prevented disease and made more room for passengers. They had time to be innovative because they did not work for very long hours. The Arawaks were said to have lived humble lives. "Arawak life was the most idyllic in the New World. They loved games, music, and the dance, and they detested fighting." (Abrahams, pg.7) They were not hostile and had no reason to be until the Spaniards came. They made them fear foreigners by forcefully taking over their land and installing control.

In 1494 Christopher Columbus and his men landed in Jamaica on their second search for the "new world." They did not intend on landing at such a beautiful Island and when they landed the crew members set up camp, but had no real intentions of making the island their own. The Europeans described Jamaica as an amazing paradise. "There, silhouetted against the evening sky, arose sheer and darkly green Xamayca. It is the fairest island that eyes have beheld: mountainous and the land seems to touch the sky..." (Abrahams, pg.25) When the Europeans came back to the island they settled in St. Ann's Bay and named the first town, "New Seville." At first they had an amicable relationship with the Arawaks, but later the Spanish began to mistreat them. They used the Arawaks land as a location to hold their supplies while searching for new ground. Since Christopher Columbus was after the Americas at this time, they used Jamaica as a base mainly for producing crops and livestock. Jamaica was not completely obtained by the Spanish until 1509 when Juan de Esquivel was sent there. This was by the request of Diego Columbus, Christopher Columbus' son, in order to take over the land. Although they cultivated new crops they did not get a large amount of commission from them. They thought they would get a lot more out of the land than they actually did. Along with bringing new crops he also brought Spanish people as well. He installed harsh Spanish customs of which the Arawaks had to abide. They were soon to be a distant memory in Jamaica's history.

Extinction overtook the Arawakan population approximately fifty years after the Spanish arrived. There were about 60,000 of the natives when Columbus settled on the Island and by the late sixteenth century, the population was wiped out. Some historians believe that a tribe namely, the Caribs, would have wiped them out anyway. The Caribs were a tribe similar to the Arawaks, but they were much more violent. There was no way to tell whether or not the Caribs would have wiped them out due to the Spanish arrival. The Arawaks were treated cruelly under new Spanish rule. Their lives were completely turned upside down from their once simple lifestyle. Now they lived in fear and most

of the natives were enslaved and forced to do strenuous labor that ended up being a large factor in their downfall. It was said that the Spanish:

“Commandeered food from the Indians and forced them to work on building the capital. A church and palace were laid out. Indians were rounded up and forced to cart the huge stones that were to go into the building. Others were set to digging mines, for the Spaniards were always seeking gold.” (Abrahams, pg.8)

New diseases presented themselves on Jamaica as a result of European invasion. Smallpox and many other harmful sicknesses became ubiquitous among the poor natives. The Arawaks could not fight off this foreign disease and many died from it because their bodies had no way of fighting off the alien bacteria. In addition the Spanish continued to pillage and kill the natives and often did not feed them enough in order for their survival.

“Vast numbers died as a result and thousands more committed suicide by hanging themselves or drinking poisonous cassava juice to escape from their bondage. Mothers are said to have murdered their children rather than let them grow up and suffer the slavery they had known.” (Floyd, pg.31)

When the Arawak population began to deteriorate the Spanish had to import slaves from Africa in order to keep the intensive labor going. They harbored these slaves from West Africa. Eventually the Africans ran away due to the arrival of the British colonists or just on a quest for freedom. They were able to obtain weapons from the Spanish who were forced to flee to Cuba in order to survive. “Such individuals managed to escape took to inaccessible fastness in the hills. There they claimed to have intermarried with Arawak survivors and to have established their own society.” (Henriques, pg.15)

These ‘runaway slaves’ were later classified as the Maroons. The name comes from the Spanish word ‘Cimarron’ which stands for “domestic cattle that had escaped to a wild existence.” (Campbell, 1) A large amount of the Maroons were freed slaves. They went to the mountaintops to seek a continued freedom and the ability to have lives separate from the Europeans that had been taking over the island.

As Habeed Solloum explained, “ Their unwillingness to accept the yoke of the colonial slave masters made them unique among the Africans brought in bondage to the Americas. In the mountains and jungles of Jamaica, they earned for themselves and autonomy never before seen by Africans in the new world.”

The Maroons were strong willed. They would go to almost any length to maintain their status on the island as free citizens. A better life was tangible in their eyes and they wanted to spread this idea to the slaves that were being tormented by the European tyrants. They were true rebels against the European system and through bloodshed and hard work they were able to create a place in the mountains for themselves that was for the most part untouched by others. The difficult terrain of the Maroon communities proved to be helpful when they were under attack or wanted a place to escape.

Maroons are made up of two different groups; the Winwards and the Leewards. The Winwards, led by Queen Nanny, presided on the eastern part of the island. The Leewards, led by Cudjoe, inhabited the western side. The Maroons became a dominant force on the Jamaican Island. They created for themselves a community in which they could live by their own terms. They were able to obtain land easily especially because of the increase in their population. As newcomers arrived in Jamaica throughout the years, the Maroons would either take them by surprise to their part of the land, or the slaves would leave their owners in order to escape and join a community in which they could be free from the terrible reign of European authority.

“Laws were passed in Jamaica and elsewhere giving every citizen the power to capture Maroons, dead or alive, and generous rewards were proffered. Even slaves would be granted

freedom for capturing or killing Maroons.” (Campbell, 2)

The Maroons were slowly starting to gain power and conserve their freedom by keeping the colonists away. No matter how hard the oppressors tried to control the Maroons they often failed. Tensions between colonists and Maroons continued to grow. Although Jamaican settlers had to deal with these Maroons, word got out about the rich soil and everyone now wanted a piece of the Caribbean paradise. It had endless opportunities for economic gain and once the British caught wind of what was happening they invaded the Island multiple times throughout the early 1600s. Finally in 1655, they succeeded and thus was the end to the 150 years of Spanish rule. This may have been a positive defeat in the eyes of the English, but the slaves had a different view of this raid. They were going to make sure that their freedom was known to whomever tried to occupy their island.

After over a century of being settled by the Spanish, Jamaica was taken over by the British. They chose Jamaica because of its rich resources. “The first British settlers in the Caribbean experimented with tropical crops, such as tobacco, indigo, cocoa, and cotton, that could be easily sold in Europe and North America, before turning their attention to sugar as the most profitable crop.” (Floyd, 38) They had already failed in their attempted conquest of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The Jamaican Island was then being controlled by the Spanish and Oliver Cromwell, on his “western design” quest, figured it would be an easier take over than his last two destinations. Jamaica had far less soldiers and even fewer soldiers whom were armed. Cromwell sent his men, Penn and Venable, to annex the Island. The Spanish had no place to go when the British naval fleet came and attacked. They were greatly outnumbered and had no chance against the thousands of armed soldiers that came to conquer. The British defeated the Spanish after five years of combat. When the Spaniards recognized that after all these years of intense battle they would not succeed, they fled to Cuba. Under Yassis’ order, before escaping the Spanish freed their cattle and slaves who would then,

“At dark of night they came down from their mountain haunts, launched sudden attacks on isolated plantations, killed and plundered, and retired to the mountains before the planters could act.” (Abrahams, 56)

The reason the Maroons were increasing in numbers was because of the growing slave trade to Jamaica. The British needed more people to carry out the strenuous labor cultivating sugar cane entailed. The sugar industry was gaining power throughout the world and the colonists now had a perfect place to farm the cash crop. They took advantage of what the island had to offer and began exporting large amounts of sugar. They soon became one of the largest exporters of sugar in the world.

With the emergence of the sugar industry and its rise in importance, slave trade grew nationwide. Jamaica was hosting thousands of slaves. The sugar cane was the hardest to cultivate and the British realized that they needed a lot more slaves if they wanted to keep up with economic demands. They worked on the sugar cane plantations under terrible conditions. As the slave trade continued to thrive, the British made an incredible amount of money from it. Slavery was seen as the only way to get the sugar cultivated and without it the British believed they would not be as successful in their sugar trade.

Although the Maroons were causing them trouble, the British still thrived because of this new economic gain based on the exportation of sugar. Slaves brought to Jamaica often traveled months in dreadful conditions on the ‘middle passage’ from West Africa to the Caribbean. On these voyages the slaves were treated terribly as though they were not living people. They were tossed overboard if sick and beaten, sometimes to death. After this gruesome trip they were sent straight to work on the sugar plantations. The reasons were obvious why many of them tried to escape. They had to endure punishment on a daily basis with no reward for their efforts. The British soon became one of the largest exporters of sugar in the world. “By 1800, sugar plantations and large-scale African slavery had spread to every corner of Jamaica where level land and suitable soils would allow.” (Floyd, 40)

Going back to the Maroons, the British were having a hard time colonizing Jamaica in the beginning because of slave rebellions that were mainly instigated by the Maroons. Additionally they were not accustomed to the climate and the ability to find food became harder for them. Pirates were still attacking the island as they did to the Spanish years earlier. Livestock was set loose and they ran freely. This unappealing experience was not expected and many people did not want to stay on the Island. Oliver Cromwell had a hard time getting people to live on Jamaica, because although it was beautiful, they had to deal with too many annoyances. The Maroons being the man cause of these annoyances, made their presence on the island known to all.

"By the seventeenth century despite their small numbers the Negroes had become a minor menace to the colonist. Time and money were spent on putting down slave rebellions and chasing runaway slaves." (Henriques, 15)

The runaway Maroons were definitely not making the British colonists' stay a comfortable one. They randomly stole from them at night and held surprise attacks on their plantations. Livestock was taken and so were plantation slaves. The Maroons did this in order to survive and make their community base stronger in number. The British would import countless numbers of slaves only to lose them to the hills. The life of the Maroons was one of importance because they actually stood up for themselves and what they believed in. They knew slavery was unjust and the fact that they revolted against it shows their character. The British were beginning to get irritated and realized they need to make a change soon before the Maroons had complete control over the caribbean island.

Many slave revolts occurred during British control and this ultimately led to the first Maroon war of 1731. The opposing groups fought each other for eight years. The Maroons were well known for the way they fought. Fierce and unexpected ambush was the main way the Maroons had success. Guerrilla warfare was used against their enemies. The idea of Guerrilla warfare is that in which the group will host a surprise attack on their opponents in order to catch them off guard. Once they attack they will quickly retreat in order to avoid a true confrontation. This was perfect for the Maroons because they were generally outnumbered by their competitors. There was no other way for them to succeed because they had no chance against the British as a whole, but since they attacked small groups at a time they had greater success. It enabled them to slowly but surely start getting into the Colonists heads. Maroons were also more experienced with the land. This made it much easier for them to maneuver themselves strategically around the Island without getting into any danger. They knew hideouts that were foreign to the invaders because they had dwelled on the land for many more years. By the end of the war the British were left confused and weak. These rebellions worked out very well for the Maroons and it started to intimidate their rivals greatly. The consistent force of fighting made them a very powerful counterpart and they were no longer ignored as a group with talent and vigor. Lyrics from Jimmy Cliff's, "The Harder They Come," defines the Maroons perfectly. "And I keep on fighting for the things I want, Though I know that when you're dead you can't. But I'd rather be a free man in my grave, than living as a puppet or a slave."

When the British realized that victory was unlikely they offered to make a compromise with the Maroons. They didn't want to worry any longer when the next guerrilla attack would be or if their imported slaves would be captivated and taken from their plantations. To create this treaty, Colonel Guthrie and the Leeward Maroon leader, Cudjoe (or Kujo), came to an agreement. This treaty stated that the Maroons were entitled to fifteen hundred acres of land and their freedom was secure. They could now hunt three miles outside of the town and were able to keep their community as their own. In return for this, the Maroons would help the British government by protecting the colony and trying to prevent slave uprisings. They would no longer taking runaway slaves and integrate them into their society. Instead the retrieval of the runaway slaves was asked of the Maroons. If they successfully returned the runaway slaves, hey would receive a reward for their effort. So peace fell upon the two groups in 1739 and it seemed successful. The Maroons held their word and even killed Tacky when he tried to lead a slave rebellion in 1760. That is until the Second Maroon War in 1795.

The Second Maroon War transpired between the Trelawny Parish Maroons and the British. The other Maroons refused to join them in battle because they were, for the most part, content with the existing peace treaty. The Trelawny Parish Maroons believed that rebellion was once again necessary because, even under the peace treaty, they felt they were being mistreated. The major event that caused their discontent was when two Maroons were whipped for taking pigs. The British did not stick to their word or the land barriers they constructed. The two men whipped for stealing pigs were also humiliated when, "The punishment was carried out in public by a slave, which was highly insulting to the Maroons." (Zips, 123) To the Trelawnys this truly defied the treaty and it was time for them to make another change.

The British, led by Balcarres, were accompanied by over a thousand soldiers whereas the Maroons yielded a couple hundred. Even though there was a significant difference in numbers, the war lasted for months. This in large part was a result of the Maroons' use of old guerilla warfare method. The landscaped proved to be in favor of the Maroons again. They could hide and attack as they pleased while the British were left dumbfounded. Although this allowed the Maroons to hold out for a while, eventually they were asked to surrender and they accepted. The only reason they subjugated themselves to the British was because they did not have the support of all the Maroons. They were too small to continue to fight the thousands of British soldiers brought to the island. The problem with the British General Walpoles' suggestion of surrender was that many of the Maroons did not hear about the option to surrender. Those who surrendered would be safe from the deportation to Nova Scotia. All of the others were headed towards a different fate.

In 1796, disregarding General Walpoles' protest, the British government deported the Maroons, that did not surrender in time, to Nova Scotia. It was Walpole's plan to take over the Maroons, but this is not what intended when he implemented the option of surrender. He wanted to go back to being on peaceful terms with the Maroons, but because of the miscommunication, the deportation commenced. Although their moral was tested, the Maroons never gave up the fight for freedom. When sent to Nova Scotia they could not adapt to the climate and caused such a commotion that the people in charge could not handle it anymore. As a result they sent the Maroons to Sierra Leone, Africa. The group is still present in Africa today.

The slave trade was ever growing in Jamaica but by the late 1700s the idea of abolition was becoming public ideal. People such as John Wesley of Britain, Granville Sharp, and many more started to voice their human rights opinions to the public. This ignited change in the people. They soon began to worry about the welfare of the ill treated Africans. The example of the Sharp brothers helping an African slave, Strong, also got the people thinking about their customs. Although it was great that they were trying to get their voices heard, the influential ones whom really needed to be convinced were parliament. In 1803 a bill on abolition passed the House of Commons, but did not make it through the House of Lords. By 1808 the bill was passed stating that all slave trade was from here on out, "Utterly abolished, prohibited, and declared to be unlawful."

Although the bill was said to have abolished all slave trade, it was not completely over. "Other nations were free to continue the trade and even in those countries where it had been made illegal a certain amount of slave smuggling went on." (Black, 150) By 1827, the slave raiding industry was punishable by death. This was a great start, but it did not completely emancipate the slaves. They were still under their masters' command. Inevitably the owners still treated their slaves even more poorly than before due to the abolition of slave trade.

The fight did not subside though and soon the government started to make rules on the treatment of slaves. The government was hoping that they could slowly bring about change. The House of Assembly in Jamaica did not take these new regulations easily and mayhem broke out between the two. In order to punish the Jamaica Legislature the English put a large tax on the sugar so many people could no longer afford it. "If slavery could not produce cheap sugar it was no longer

necessary." (Black, 158) They used this conclusion to again fight for the final abolition of slavery. By July 1833 an emancipation bill was provided to the House. The abolition of slavery was a success when the bill passed one month later. Granted the emancipation act made a schedule of long-term succession of slavery, abolition was well on its way to being complete. In August 1838 slavery was officially abolished in Jamaica!

Jamaica is still inhabited by the Maroons. Festivals are thrown in order to honor and remember their troubled past. From the start of the sixteenth century, Jamaica had turned into the campground for bloodshed and distrust. Starting with the aboriginal Arawaks, the people of Jamaica went through hundreds of years of abuse and turmoil before they would be completely free. The reason the Maroons still exist today is because of their ancestors courage and will to never give up when people were trying to get them down. They dealt with broken promises and disappointments throughout their lives yet still prevailed. I believe it was their strength and voice that led the British to start thinking about the mistreatment of slaves. With that realization came the change all Africans were waiting to see. The abolition on the slave trade and eventually the end to slavery all together. It was the Maroons that made the idealistic fantasy of altering the disastrous living conditions of the slaves a reality. Their significant role in Jamaican history will not soon be forgotten.

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